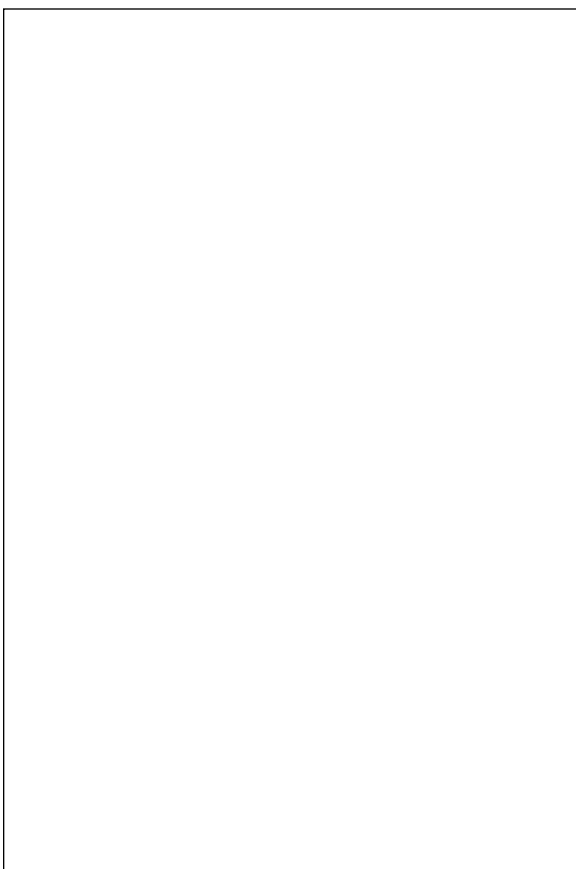


## **Luncheon Address**



Gen. Bryce Poe II

## History and Its Uses

Gen. Bryce Poe II, USAF (Ret.)

The history of American military aviation is an exciting subject, and I am both pleased and flattered to be asked to address such a distinguished crowd. I want to discuss the value of history, a subject sometimes unappreciated by the Air Force. About three or four years ago when downsizing started, one of the very senior officers decided the first thing to eliminate would be the history office. Fortunately, he had his mind improved, but the point is that many individuals have never understood that the historical perspective offers positive and important support to their mission.

I have always considered the study of history to be very useful to the military; it has certainly been important to me. With the distinguished scholars we have here today, I want to make absolutely clear that I do not consider myself a historian. Some years ago I was told I had been labeled as a meddling dilettante. When I looked up “dilettante,” I felt a little hurt. Some definitions called it a dabbler or trifler. But I felt better once I found the “right” one: half scholar. That describes this dilettante—I have always read as much history as I can, in part to learn how men and women have acted and made decisions, and how complex circumstances have affected the outcome of events.

Of all military professionals, we in the aerospace business operate with weapons and tactics and techniques farthest removed from intervention. We work in a world of speed and flexibility and lethality that would have been unthinkable even a generation ago. As a result, among soldiers, those of us who deal mostly in the technological present and future have least appreciated the value of history. Still, not only have military scholars and some untried theorists defended the usefulness of the historical perspective, many of our toughest, most hard-headed combat leaders have as well.

We must be careful, however, with the way history is recounted. Besides those who discount the often grim lessons of the past, there are those who try to glorify it and those who elaborate on the facts, or even fabricate them. Today we must also be careful of the reworking of history in the name of “political correctness.” One example of the glorification of historical events and personalities is the often repeated story of General Cambronne’s request for surrender at Waterloo. He proclaimed, according to many printed accounts,

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“The guard dies, but never surrenders.” In fact, we have no idea what he actually said. Similarly, popular history usually does not record that what Brig. Gen. Anthony C. McAuliffe said to the Germans at Bastogne was a little more crude than “Nuts.” Thomas Jefferson’s reminder should serve us well in this respect: “A morsel of genuine history is a thing so rare as to be always valuable.” And, although Ben Franklin complained that “historians relate not so much what is done as what they would have believed,” I think his comment applies more often to generals than it does to historians.

There are many ways to put history to advantage. We can benefit from traditional wisdom in the experience and writing of thoughtful men and women who came before us. Personally, I have often found it to be more successful to quote some dead prophet than to use my own words. To give you an example, I cannot recall how many letters I got from the Office of the Secretary of Defense that began, “It is not helpful for a senior officer, when asked to comment on the meaning of a carefully thought out and prudent order, to cut all numbers to 16 percent of the validated requirement.” When asked what that meant, I once cited the retort of a British minister just prior to World War I who said, “Leave the old Army alone and don’t make war under any circumstances.”

I made that comment at a time when I had determined to resign from the Air Force in anger. Gen. Ira Eaker talked me out of it by putting his finger in a glass of water, pulling it out and saying, “Your resignation will make about that much difference. Somebody else who will be happy to jump through hoops will take the job, and nothing will change.” So I stayed, and continued to use quotes and historical examples to try to make my points. Usually, the issue in contention had to do with the budget, but on one occasion the *Wall St. Journal* printed my remark that we are much like Sun-Tzu who said that we must not rely “on the likelihood of the enemy not coming, but on our own readiness to receive him.” I went on to say that “what we are doing today is betting that we aren’t going to have a war.”

Another perspective I like comes from the old Duke of Marlboro who said, “There is a time for all things, there is even a time for change, and that is when it can no longer be resisted.” As a logistician, I have a great deal of respect for John Churchill, the Duke of Marlboro, because of his talents as an organizer. In 1704, heading for a fight, he led his army along the Rhine. Whenever they stopped, the troops would find shoes and meals and bridges and hospitals. All they had to do was put their kettles on the fire and their tents up and go to bed. Yet, despite the duke’s brilliance as a logistician and his theoretical recognition of the inevitability of change, he was reluctant to accept a new and better musket.

To give you another historical anecdote about commanders who, unfortunately, we all may have known, Marshal of France Comte Hermann Maurice de Saxe spoke of the “commander who tries to do everything and as a result

does nothing,” or “the commander who, in an attempt to clarify previous orders, will confuse the spirit of his whole army with multitudinous messages, throw everything into horrible confusion.” The advice to “never substitute the decision” is another point worth taking.

Contemporary military men also have looked to the lessons of history. Lord Tedder freely quoted Sun-Tzu, Bacon, and Mahan in his postwar lectures at Cambridge. Air Vice Marshal Sir Robert Saundby cited Clausewitz in warning of the dangers of unilateral disarmament. Gen. Leon Johnson, who is no inexperienced theorist, having won the Medal of Honor, said, “The study of military history really comes into play after one has left the operational units. It seems terribly important to study the lessons of history when selecting weapons and determining national actions and reactions and deciding on the scope and the objective of war plans.” Gen. Claire Chennault credited German ace Manfred von Richthofen with developing in 1916 the two-fighter team that he used so successfully in China. Many people do not think of Gen. Curtis LeMay as thinking historically, but nothing could be farther from the truth. He wrote:

For centuries successful military strategies were based on principles that we have all learned and equally as many centuries of military experience. Those lessons came hard and at great cost in lives, in gold, and in national power. These principles have been successful for more than 2,500 years. We ignore these lessons at our peril. Modern war is far too destructive to apply those principles exactly the way Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest would have applied them. Today the desired way to apply those principles is by strategic anticipation and development. For if we are not first with the most capability, we are very likely to be too late with too little.

What about the ability of our historians to prepare for and provide the kind of information that improves readiness, prevents problems, removes obstacles, and takes advantage of opportunities? Let me give you a few examples that have come to my attention. Early in the first winter in the Korean War our F-80s were parked next to some B-26s that were really taking a beating because the ground had frozen; they kept blowing up their own aircraft. The technical data was not helpful, but an official record of similar bombings in Italy a decade earlier provided the exact fuse settings required. That historical document solved the problem.

When I was in SAC in 1960, assigned to an Atlas missile squadron, I spent most of my little free time in the history library where there was a sign that read, “Ask history first.” The historians were, in fact, extremely helpful. On one occasion their research allowed the cancellation of a single reconnaissance mission that saved the taxpayer over \$6 million.

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At that time, when the first few missile squadrons were activated, both the mission and the people were new, new to each other and to the Air Force. Some of the units were given famous old insignias whose heritage was provided by the historians. When the equipment of those new units was marked with an emblem that had flown missions over Germany or had been in the Pacific in World War II, and their colors displayed the battle streamers of a dozen campaigns, there was a marked increase in unit morale. The pride that comes from such intangibles cannot be overestimated. A friend once told me about having to break up a fight in which one of the youngsters, who had been ridiculed, responded, "That's right. I may be a clerk. But I am a clerk in the triple-nickel fighter squad." His pride in his unit gave him courage.

I was the night off-duty officer when the Cuban missile crisis kicked off. You know, you worry about yourself when you go into combat, but that night, that first night, standing there wondering if your family or half the people in this country are going to be alive the next day was the most stressful night I ever spent. At any rate, the historians were on our battle staff too. Their insights at the time and their documentation of wartime events became invaluable afterward. I would urge any historian who is not invited to the staff meeting to try to invite himself. Just slip into the back of the room and attend regularly until there is an opportunity to give a note to the commander or one of the senior staff officers to the effect that, "I thought the attached might be helpful in the circumstances that were brought up this morning." Pretty soon you establish the value of the historical perspective, so that people routinely look for your input.

Once they begin to understand it, commanders will come to value historical information—first, because of its honesty. As you no doubt recall, in the middle of World War II, President Franklin Roosevelt urged the military services to prepare histories of the conflict. They were to be absolutely unbiased, no matter whose feelings were hurt or where the truth lay. That directive led to the official military history programs of all the services, which have continued to write thoroughly researched, clear-sighted books and monographs about their nation's military actions during peace and war.

The accuracy and detail of official histories is often enhanced when historians are deployed along with the troops. Many of you know my friend Dr. Alfred Hurley, a prime example of the dedicated and professional historian. He came to my wing in Vietnam, where we had five bases. He went to every one of them and flew a lot of missions with my antique air force. Those included the three squadrons of EC-47s that were older than the crew. They flew to some pretty bad places to locate the enemy by radio transmissions and to bring friendly fire on the target. Flying with those guys, getting shot at, Al went directly to the primary sources.

I also had historians on my staff when I was wing commander of the 26th Tactical Reconnaissance Wing at Ramstein in 1969–1970. There, we had real

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problems in getting our aircraft to gunnery ranges in Spain. The French air traffic control delighted in holding us up until we sometimes had to get a tanker to refuel just to go the very short distance from Germany to Spain. A French armor regiment was stationed a few miles from us. My historian researched the history of that North African unit and its commander. The background of both were quite interesting. The French commander had been wounded several times, in Europe, Asia, and in North Africa. He and I became good friends. I surprised him with an F-4 flyover for his Bastille Day parade, and he loved every opportunity to fly in the Phantom. After a while, I said to him, "You know, I am having a terrible time getting across France in these planes." He—or somebody—must have pulled some strings, because the harassment stopped. I will always give him credit for the help because, although he denied it when I asked him, when I thanked him, he said, "Your shooting, like mine, is important. With your Phantoms and my tanks, we will sweep the Soviets before us."

In later years when I returned to USAFE, we experienced serious flying safety problems. There were just too many "dumb" accidents—failure to reset altimeters, lower-level acrobatics, and trying to fly visually in bad weather. Flying an F-4, I went to all the wings to talk about the situation. As some of our aviators here will tell you, a general has very little credibility. So, to get people's attention, I began carrying with me accident records. When I went to USAFE in 1974, the fighter rate was 3.9 accidents per 100,000 hours. I pointed out that when I had signed up for flight training in World War II, the rate was 44; 16,000 aircraft were destroyed and about 5,000 airmen died in that one year. When I got my wings after the war, the rate was 61, with 2,000 plus crashes and about 900 fatalities, including the same irresponsible flying that went on in Europe. None of these fatalities were combat losses, all were training accidents. I got some interesting reactions. One captain said, "General, you should have quit your story with a loss rate of 16 rather than 61; 16 would have scared the hell out of everybody, 61 is not believable." Another pilot asked, "How many classmates did you lose?" I told him that of the 105 who went to fighters, we lost 39. I think that the numbers, more than any lecture I might have given, sank in. Today the USAF Class A accident rate is 1.25. Our people are smarter and our weapons more lethal than ever before, and we pay great attention to safety.

Air Force historians served me especially well when I was assigned as legislative liaison in Washington between 1965 and 1967. I used to brag that those were the only 22 months of my career I spent in the Pentagon. On one occasion, a congressman called me to complain that "the Air Force ain't doing right by one of my constituents. You are flying them jets low over his farm, he is suing you, you are making him go to court needlessly." The JAG, the judge advocate, was no help. He told me that the constituent was going to win, but Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara had decided to make

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them all go to court, expecting that some of them would drop out. However, a check of the records turned up the fact that the small airfield used as an Air National Guard airstrip for some 15 years belonged to the farmer who was suing us. So I called the member back and, exceeding my authority by some great measure, said, "I am certain you will be as surprised as we were to learn that Mr. Booth (John Wilkes, I am sure, was in his background) is not just a farmer but the owner and operator of the airfield. I promise you that we can solve the problem quickly. Perhaps not immediately, but certainly within 90 or 120 days, I can get those airplanes out of there." I guess he had visions of the people employed cutting the grass and pumping the gas and flipping the hot dogs, so he said, "Now, son" (you know, you get to be a 45-year-old colonel and it is still "son"), "son, don't you do nothing hasty. I will go home this week and straighten all this out." He called me that night—at home—to say, "The Air Force don't have to worry its head no more. Mr. Booth was over at the county courthouse today to withdraw that case." I thanked the congressman. Then I went to bases and unit offices and asked if we couldn't get out of that damn patriot's airfield.

Both in legislative liaison and as a senior commander, I found the research done, often by the historians, to be priceless. I cannot remember a happier time in my life than the two times I was able to say, "Mr. Chairman, we could not agree with you more. What we are doing makes no sense at all. But we are required to do that by public law X, Y, Z. Here is a copy, sir, of the three things that we sent over during the last four years to try and get a waiver from those requirements."

On the other hand, when you are backed up by facts, you can get rather smug. Unfortunately, you do not always win, no matter how well prepared. For instance, I should have known better than to feel confident when jousting with Congressman Jack Brooks, who served on the Government Operations Committee. The subject of one of our debates was replacement of our ancient IBM computers, at one time the best in the world. But after several years of hard use they were going to pieces, and the contractor would not support us or give us parts. We were in real trouble. I requested permission to go "sole source," promising before God I would compete the contract within three years. When I finally went before the committee armed with much valuable information, I played my ace: "All I ask, and for the same reason, is to do what was approved just six weeks ago for Mr. Brooks' office, namely, obtain what is necessary to keep the system going now and look for a future time to do the rest. That way I can keep my system on-line." At that point, Brooks got up and, as he left the room, looked over his shoulder and said, "You need a lesson in civics." That was the end of it.

Incidentally, the most powerful House committee chairman during my days in Washington was Mendel Rivers. As chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, he did a great deal for the military, but he was extreme-

ly difficult to deal with. My Navy counterpart called one day to say that he was in “terrible trouble with the chairman. Rivers called up this morning and said, ‘Son, the United States Navy has lost its mind. I understand that the nuclear submarine *John C. Calhoun* launched today is going to be based at Newport, Rhode Island. Now, Mr. Calhoun, God rest his soul, wherever he might be, heaven or hell, wouldn’t want that boat anywhere but in Charleston, South Carolina.’” Even worse, he went on to say, “Defying any reason whatsoever, I have learned that tied up at the dock at Charleston today is the nuclear submarine, *Ulysses S. Grant*.” As you can imagine, the subs swapped ports so that the *Grant* was moved from Charleston. That was the Navy’s version of political headaches that had nothing to do with military requirements.

Much of the useful data I got when I was in the Pentagon concerned staff operations. I was often frustrated when dealing with people who had not been in and did not stay in government very long, but who instantly knew the best way to handle your business. One example was a young congressional staffer who told me, “You should just find out how the big boys do things; then you can manage your engine inventory like the airlines do.” At the time, the biggest commercial airline had about 1,300 engines. I had 44,000, plus there were the thousands in the Army and Navy. The shelf life of those Hill staffers being so short, within 18 months the first guy had left, and his replacement, who had received the same simplistic briefing, had to be given the same explanation. Only by then the Air Force had 55,000 engines. It was essential, throughout these kinds of exchanges, to have the historian sitting in staff meetings to provide data and background.

Earlier I indicated that the value of history should be made clearer to Air Force officers, who tend to be somewhat blind to it. A military officer’s first responsibility is to maintain the highest possible level of performance in his everyday job. It is not going to do any good to quote Clausewitz if you cannot put the bombs on target or conduct air refueling or man a missile silo. But sooner or later, probably sooner, a military officer is going to have to make decisions, and if he has learned some of the historian’s habits of sifting and dissecting and questioning and comparing, he will have cultivated an invaluable mental discipline. You may have heard the story about the commander who said, “I am in a big hurry. Give me half the information so I can make a quick decision.” As we all know, decisions are best made with *all* the relevant information, and from the long view of continuity and change over time.

History is, of course, one among several disciplines that broaden and deepen our decision-making capabilities. Business administration, mathematics, engineering, and especially economics all employ useful systems of analysis. But in my judgment, history has two advantages. The first is that the intellectual process is more closely attuned to the requirements of military decision-making. Second, history is about people, and much of our work is about people, whether in coordination with others or when taking major command

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responsibilities. Any reading of history makes clear how much personality and leadership affect the outcome of events. Human behavior is the most important factor in almost every military problem.

Historians can also provide models of how to write. In no other profession besides the military can the cost of misunderstanding be so great. If Robert E. Lee had written a little more clearly to Lt. Gen. James Longstreet, for instance, he might not have had such a bad three days at Gettysburg. Regrettably, many military people not only write poorly, often their writing is intentionally crafted to shelter them from criticism or responsibility. The historian's ability to cut through jargon or obfuscation can aid senior officers in understanding the underlying meaning and the implications of many opaque or inconclusive staff reports.

Similarly, too many people write too much. Once I reviewed an extensive plan with a 26-page annex that tried to second-guess everything that might happen and every conceivable action to take as a result of a test missile launch. However, the missile did not accommodate the plan. It reacted in an entirely unexpected fashion, so all the excessive verbiage and proposed "what-if" solutions were irrelevant. We might recall Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman's lengthy plan to move a modern army of 50,000 people through the heart of enemy country for six months, and how it compared to the events as they played out.

With that historical reminder to sober us up, I will let you go and thank you for your attention.